

The mission of the N.C. Maritime Museum is to collect, preserve, research, and interpret the maritime history, culture, and environment of coastal North Carolina.

The Making of the N.C. Maritime Museum

The N.C. Maritime Museum did not really begin as a museum. Nor is its date of origin only two decades ago, as its twenty-year commemoration indicates. Like all good things, the museum metamorphosed in its own good time – it just took about fifty years.

The museum began as a “collection” – and a motley one at that; a smattering of fish casts, jars of preserved crustacea, Pfleuger fishing tackle and bird skins. This eclectic array of specimens appears to have come from the 1898 International Fisheries Exposition in Bergen, Norway, when, between 1882-1893, North Carolina took part in various expositions to encourage development of the state.

Beginning about 1904, visitors could view “the collection” in what was then the U.S. Fisheries Laboratory on Piver’s Island in Beaufort. J.O. Barbour, a longtime area resident, remembers seeing the collection around 1917.

“My family and I came down from New Bern on an excursion train,” recalled Mr. Barbour. “We went over to a building on Piver’s Island. It was open to the public on occasion, but it wasn’t an everyday thing. I saw huge turtles there and they were alive and kept in a circular pen. That was quite a sight for a kid of five or six years old. And we went in the building and saw the exhibits. I remember that very well.”

Dr. Al Chestnut, who in 1951 became the first official curator of the collection, remembers when it was displayed on Piver’s Island “on the first floor in a great big room where there was a lot of preserved stuff.”

“Visitors came in to see it,” recalled Dr. Chestnut. “This was in the 1920s and ‘30s, I think. Some of it dated back to the early expeditions made offshore here in 1880s and ‘90s.”

What “the collection” became is what visitors see today – an exemplary exhibition of maritime artifacts, live aquarium displays, historical exhibits and natural specimens, combined with interactive education programs, talks, demonstrations, lectures, field trips, workshops, sailing programs, boatbuilding classes, and special studies curriculums.

For nearly half a century, the motley assortment was known simply as “the collection.” It was exhibited in some fashion at the “fisheries museum” on Piver’s Island, a misnomer for the U.S. Fisheries Laboratory. During those fifty years, government agencies changed and old buildings were demolished and new ones built. The collection, with its purpose still undefined, was shuffled, exhibited, housed and stored in one government building after another between Morehead City and Beaufort. When America fell on hard times during the great depression, an “alphabet soup” of work forces was created. Some of these workers were hired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to create casts, which became part of the exhibit items.

In the 1950s, the unrealized potential of the collection came to the attention of Harry T. Davis, a geologist and director of the N.C. Natural History Museum in Raleigh. Mr. Davis took the collection under wing, designating it an “official” state museum collection, and sowed the seed of what would eventually become the N.C. Maritime Museum.

In retrospect, such a move by Mr. Davis was not surprising. A geologist and life-long student of natural history, he was born and reared among the sea oats and salt air of North Carolina’s Outer Banks. Because of his interest in education and his knowledge of coastal resources, he recognized the importance and potential of a collection representing the flora, fauna, and maritime history of North Carolina’s coast.

During its many moves, the collection miraculously remained intact. The assortment was given many names; the Fisheries Museum, the Marine Museum, the Morehead Museum, the Hampton Memorial Museum.

But in 1951, it and its yet-to-be home were given their first official title: the Hampton Marine Museum, authorized by the N.C. General Assembly and dedicated as an extension of the N.C. State Museum of Natural History.

The museum was named for Roy Wade Hampton of Plymouth, N.C., an ardent supporter of commercial fisheries, Chairman of the N.C. Department of Conservation and Development, and a longtime member of its board. Mr. Hampton favored a more prominent display of the museum collection and encouraged preparation of an area in the more highly visible N.C. Department of Conservation and Development building at Camp Glenn in Morehead City. The collection was moved from Beaufort and Dr. Al Chestnut of the Institute of Fisheries Research was appointed as its first curator.

“I was given the task of sorting out all the stuff and getting it in some kind of form to display it in the big room at the main entrance,” recalled Dr. Chestnut. “There was not money to do anything to speak of. Some cabinets and display cases were built to organize the fishes and bottles. I hung the models up, had big, old, cumbersome glass cases with fishes and stuff in them, and that was the start of the museum. I was curator for the first few years; curator in the sense that somebody had to be in charge of pushing the stuff around, hanging stuff up and keeping up with the collection. I used to get letters from teachers wanting to bring school children down. They’d arrive by the bus loads, particularly during spring.”

But there was the problem of money. There were no funds to support the museum or serve its visitors. Dr. Chestnut, a leader in the field of marine studies, traveled a great deal and held a number of advisory and board positions. Maintenance and staffing were scanty at best, shared by whichever government agency had spare manpower at any given time.

Because of circumstances that remain unclear, the museum “closed” from 1952 to 1959, part of which time its contents were stored. During the closure, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service received numerous requests from agencies wanting to display the collection. There was also an attempt to move the museum to Fort Macon, but Hurricane Hazel made her infamous call on Carteret County in 1954 and washed out that idea. There was even a flurry of correspondence suggesting moving the collection to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service branch in Galveston, Texas, “because it has not been properly used and was not in good condition.” This suggestion got the attention of state and local officials and scientists, and the great cogs of government began to turn.

In 1959, the Galveston suggestion was resolved in a memorandum between the N.C. Department of Conservation and Development and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The museum and its collection would stay in North Carolina, but it was apparent its location and purpose had to be decided or the Hampton Marine Museum could wind up in another state.

Carteret County Representatives D.G. Bell worked out an agreement with the N.C. State Museum of Natural History, giving the natural history museum full responsibility for the restoration and reactivation of the Hampton Marine Museum. The collection was given as an indefinite loan to the natural history museum by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The natural history museum was required to replace specimens when needed, refurbish models, and assist in the proper display of exhibits. The bill also appropriated the first real operational money for the Hampton Marine Museum, in the amount of \$5,000 per year for the biennium. The money was to redesign an area in the Camp Glenn N.C. Conservation and Development facility to reopen the museum. For the first time, the Hampton Marine Museum had a sense of permanence.

The museum officially reopened in 1960. Dr. Chestnut was relieved of his curator position and N.C. Museum of Natural History employee, W.M. “Bill” Palmer, was assigned curator. The Collection now consisted of models of fish native to North Carolina waters, a display illustrating the evolution of life from the sea, exhibits of indigenous poisonous snakes, models of crustacean, various species of frogs, and display cases of shells. Admission was free and 6,508 people visited the first month.

The Museum of Natural History's Director Harry Davis, a strong marine museum supporter, urged Mr. Palmer to "speak to teachers and offer to give groups guide service." Mr. Davis himself wrote a number of letters to school superintendents, praising the museum as an educational resource and informing them of its talks and tours. Even though the museum operated seasonally and on a shoestring budget, reports show some 900 visitors on a single weekend and 300 on a week day.

Adeline W. Land was made curator in 1962, and although her salary was minimal, her support was unfailing. She added a Fresnel lens from Portsmouth, Va., fishing gear from local fishermen and relics from Shackleford Banks. She gave many volunteer hours to the museum, which was then open seven months of the year. Visitor count for the biennium totaled 33,458.

Mrs. Ruth Deyo took over as curator in 1965 and she, too, added to the collection, acquiring replicas of whaling gear, seashell displays, birds native to the region and Indian artifacts and fossils. Piece by piece, the museum collection grew and so did its number of visitors.

In 1970, the museum was again set adrift. Its building was to be demolished to make way for what is now the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries. Officials canvassed Morehead City but found no building suitable. They began to look toward Beaufort, now in the early stages of renovating its waterfront. By this time, the Beaufort Historical Association and Restoration Site had been established on Turner Street and the town was taking on a noticeable "historical" air. These facts, plus finding two old, empty and adjoining storefronts on Turner Street, convinced officials to move the museum "across the bridge" to the sleepy little town of Beaufort.

On April 1, 1970, the Hampton Marine Museum opened its doors under its own rented roof. Mrs. Deyo continued as curator and the museum extended its season by two months, remaining open April through December. During its first year on Turner Street, visitation totaled 19,737. Some fifty teachers used the facility as a teaching resource and considered it a "worthwhile learning experience."

Mrs. Deyo remained curator for the next several years, but again, the tide was about to turn. The change came about in the form of Charles McNeill, the man many regard as "the father of the museum."

Mr. McNeill was the former manager of Morehead City State Port. A graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, he was commissioned into the Navy and served in World War II. But it was his avid interest in maritime history and his love of boats that led him into the museum business. For years, he had toyed with the idea of a museum focusing on North Carolina's natural and maritime history. He had watched the development of the Hampton Marine Museum and was acquainted with Dr. Chestnut.

"He had a lot of good ideas and a proposal," recalled Dr. Chestnut. "He was envisioning a type of mariner's museum like the one in Newport News."

Mr. McNeill went to Raleigh to discuss his ideas with William Hamnett, acting director of the N.C. Museum of Natural History, under which the Hampton Marine Museum operated. He then took his plan of developing the "little one-room museum" in Beaufort into a real maritime museum to James A. Graham, commissioner of the N.C. Department of Agriculture. Apparently, Commissioner Graham was considering options for the museum, whether to discard it or put more support behind it, and Mr. McNeill's proposal came at just the right time. Commissioner Graham hired Mr. McNeill, and in July 1975, the museum got its first full-time salaried employee. It is from this date that it began to record its professional history.

Mr. McNeill remembers Commissioner Graham's comments about getting the museum off the ground: "I'm not going to tell you how to do it. You do it. Do the best you can. Do whatever you want and let me know when you need something." Such words were music to the ears of a man with a vision, and there was much to do – from the ground up.

"In those days, Beaufort was a ghost town by six o'clock in the evening," recalled Mr. McNeill. "There was no traffic at all, and the town was refurbishing its waterfront."

Mr. McNeill's first suggestion was to change the name of the museum, from Hampton Marine Museum to Hampton Mariners Museum. "This name, Hampton Marine Museum, was very misleading,"

said Mr. McNeill. "People thought we had something to do with the Marine Corps." His suggestion was accepted.

For a time, the museum was a one-man operation. Mr. McNeill rolled up his sleeves and slapped paint on the old storefront walls, and Bobby Springle, one of the earliest employees, remembers the whistle of the wind.

"The south wall was corrugated metal with lots of holes," said Mr. Springle. "We could often feel the wind blowing through it, and sand blew under it. The 'seafoam' fish panels were as welcome for their insulation as for their aesthetics. There was a large crack down the middle of the first room, caused by the south wall bearing down on the foundation. I had to paint the floors about twice a year, as sand from visitors' shoes scuffed it down to the concrete floors with regularity."

The building leaked and toilets overflowed during heavy rains. There was little operational money and no support group or endowment.

"If you needed money for something you sent a bill to The Museum of Natural History in Raleigh," recalled Mr. McNeill. "That went on a long time before we got our own budget."

Soon Mr. McNeill was able to hire four staff members: Jane Wolff, administrative assistant; Bobby Springle, museum technician and exhibits head; and Judie Spitsbergen and JoAnne Powell, curators in natural science and education. The small but enthusiastic work force shared many duties that first year, ranging from cleaning, painting, and running the small bookstore to building exhibits, mounting donated shell collections and conducting three field trips a day in a donated and conspicuous old purple truck, dubbed "the purple dragon." The staff developed programs for school groups and the public, and with nearby outdoor sites, began teaching what was then a relatively new topic in education: coastal ecology.

The innovative staff augmented its programs by calling on area scientists, retired professionals, and residents with livelihoods linked to the sea to give lectures, lead field trips and present demonstrations. Interested citizens began to volunteer time and manpower. The museum staged its first major event, the 1975 Traditional Wooden Boat Show, which is still a popular program and now attracts some of the finest handcrafted boats from across the country.

"It's hard to say when a formal volunteer program was initiated, because volunteers were attracted to the Turner Street museum almost immediately," said twenty-year employee Jane Wolff. "The first advisory board members were volunteers. So were local craftsmen and musicians who gave demonstrations, scientists who presented programs and acted as consultants, skilled individuals who repaired collections, and librarians who catalogued the 'ship's library.' Mass mailings were stuffed, stamped, and sealed by volunteers, and many prepared and served food for museum receptions and special occasions. Volunteers even loaned us boats and assisted with field programs. Even husbands, wives, and children of the staff volunteered."

It became obvious that the little storefront museum was not just a museum; it was a family, a community hub, a place where people grew and worked together to turn a vision into a reality. A number of its staff members were ten, fifteen, and twenty-year employees, whose children grew up with the museum.

Mr. McNeill encouraged new ideas and innovative programs, and quickly became affectionately renamed "Mr. Mac" by his staff. Under his leadership, the museum's direction and philosophy began to take shape.

"In the beginning, no one knew what our mission was to be," he said. "I always wanted it to be, and as time went on it became evident that it should be, a collection to recognize North Carolina's maritime history. We tried, and did in fact, blend North Carolina's maritime heritage with coastal natural history. If you're going to talk about fishing or fishermen, then you're bound to talk about the boats they go out in, which led to boatbuilding.

"I always saw the museum as an educational endeavor for visitors, and particularly for school children. We had thousands of children that came and we had programs they could participate in. In the

early days, JoAnne Powell and Judie Spitsbergen assumed sponsorship of the Summer Science School Program for Children and other programs that people actually scheduled their vacations around so their children could take part.”

In 1976, the museum increased its square footage by taking in the adjoining storefront building. It also established an advisory board, wisely selecting volunteer members from a broad spectrum of disciplines and occupations. The board functioned solely in an advisory board, wisely selecting volunteer members from a broad spectrum of disciplines and occupations. The board functioned solely in an advisory capacity, with exception of sponsoring a monthly lecture series. Few places in the country offered public programs in those days, and more often than not the museum’s makeshift lecture hall held a “standing room only” audience. Such community interest indicated strong support.

“People came to hear about the history of lighthouses, Fort Macon, coastal Indians, boat design, pirates, weather, shipwrecks, inlet migration, geology, sharks, reptiles, and amphibians, and the list could go on,” said eighteen-year employee Jeannine Kraus.

They also came to see demonstrations on knot tying, scrimshaw, net making, sailmaking, boatbuilding, blacksmithing, and natural dyes. They came to hear menhaden fishermen sing sea chanteys, authors talk about being adrift at sea, and scientists discuss coastal upwelling.

Even in these early days, much of what the museum was to become took place outside its walls; on sandy beaches, barrier islands and mud flats, on trawlers and in canoes on rivers and ponds, in maritime forests, pocosins, natural wildlife areas and woodland savannahs. The blending of coastal natural history and maritime history seemed to come naturally to the naïve but enthusiastic staff, and they implemented an interdisciplinary teaching approach long before such instruction became the norm.

To support its developing activities and provide financial assistance for programs, special exhibits and other projects, the museum established its Friends group in 1977. Today, the Friends of the Museum totals more than 1,600 members whose financial support and its unfailing allegiance has become an integral and indispensable part of the museum’s operation.

The museum’s two governing bodies, the N.C. Department of Agriculture and the N.C. Museum of Natural History, began to take note of the little maritime museum in Beaufort. In 1976, museum attendance was 48,000. In 1977 it jumped to 60,000. As its popularity grew, so did the demands on its staff. The N.C. Legislature increased funding, allowing the expansion of operations and facilities, and between 1976 and 1985 the museum added five staff members. Their expertise ranged from botany and maritime research to accession and exhibit design.

Having proved itself as a serious and reputable facility, the museum was now a member of the Council of American Maritime Museums and the American Association of Museum. It received grants to develop additional programs, and its staff traveled and contributed papers to professional meetings. Beaufort’s redeveloped waterfront was attracting tourists, and shops catering to the needs of transient boaters and weekend visitors were luring people off the beaches and into Beaufort’s picturesque downtown.

From the beginning, Mr. McNeill viewed small craft as a vital part of the museum’s mission. Boats were also a good attention- getter and made the job of building museum support more promising. But even though boats and boatbuilding were part of the plan, the space required proved to be a continuous problem. Initially, the museum used its small, cluttered but functional backyard on Turner Street for boatbuilding. In 1978, it moved its boatshop into an old tin building on the site of the current museum. Soon thereafter, it moved across the street into an old motor company building. The staff began calling it the “watercraft center” and the museum offered classes, erected a few displays, built the Silver Chalice, and each fall led special tours to area boatbuilding sites, which were often in the side yards of down east communities.

“Boatbuilding was the thing I loved and encouraged a great deal,” said Mr. McNeill. “Mike Alford was extremely helpful because he had a lot of good ideas and was an expert on traditional craft of North Carolina.”

But what really triggered the boatbuilding program into action was the arrival of English sailor and boatbuilder Geoffrey Scofield. Mr. Scofield blew in with a fleet of cruisers that hunkered down in bad weather in Beaufort harbor in 1977.

“He came out of the blue,” said Mr. McNeill. “I asked him what he did and he said he built boats. I pulled a book out of the museum library that had a lapstrake in it and he said, ‘Yes, that’s the kind of boats I build.’ So I asked him to build a boat while he was here. We didn’t have a place to build it except in the museum’s backyard and that’s where he built the first Essex. People loved to watch that kind of skill being performed and Geoffrey could work and talk at the same time – a rare combination. He built many boats and made a great contribution. His knowledge and willingness to help was the kind of thing that made the museum what it is.”

With his affinity for boats, Mr. McNeill encouraged sailboats to come to Beaufort “because the museum could offer them something, such as charts and aids to navigation.”

“There was no place around here that had things like that and there was a great need for them,” said Mr. McNeill. “We also tried to help boaters in other ways. Somebody gave us an old purple truck we called the ‘purple dragon,’ and sailors could come in and sign the truck out and go to the grocery store, do laundry or whatever. We gave navigation classes at night, taught by friends in the area. Because I was a navigator during the war, charts are a favorite subject of mine and sailors found our supply of nautical charts to be of great value. The bookstore grew a great deal from the one item.”

The museum bookstore has the largest chart dealership of NOAA charts and the only Defense Mapping Agency in the state. It also has a wide selection of Geological Survey topographic maps. Beaufort businesses and entrepreneurs began to see an increase in sailing traffic and shops catering to the sailing community began to spring up along Front Street.

The museum also invited historical sailing vessels to Beaufort, such as the *Pride of Baltimore*, *Harvey Gammage*, *Spirit of Massachusetts*, *Golden Hind*, *Pioneer*, *Mimi*, and others.

By the late 1970s, museum programs and special events, such as its Traditional Wooden Boat Show, Summer Science School for Children and Strange Seafood Exhibition, had achieved a level of excellence recognized nationwide. It had become a favorite “drop-in” spot for locals, sailors, and visitors and had captured the affection of one local family in particular – Harvey and Evelyn Smith.

The Smiths were good friends and strong supporters of the museum and Mr. McNeill often visited Mr. Smith in his fish factory. Mr. Smith owned and operated menhaden fleets in the area and in South America, and over the years had collected numerous ship models and seafaring memorabilia, which he hoped to one day put in a museum he would build.

“The Smiths made great contributions,” said Mr. McNeill. “He had a fantastic collection of ‘things,’ all sorts of things. He didn’t care what he collected and he gave us many items.”

But Mr. Smith didn’t live to fulfill his museum dream, and in 1980 Mrs. Smith donated the land where the museum now sits. The property had an estimated value upwards of \$60,000, and Mrs. Smith agreed to give it to the museum if the state would begin construction within four years. The museum had \$85,000 in planning money and chose Robert Carr Associates as its architect. Still, building a new facility called for more money than the museum could afford and, once again, again local and state support lent a helping hand. Friends of the Museum funds were used to build docks at the watercraft center. Other donations paid for the library’s fireplace, bookcases and furnishings. Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation contributed \$5,000 and R.J.R. Tobacco Company contributed \$50,000.

“When Mr. Smith passed away, his wife gave me carte blanche to go over and get what I wanted,” said Mr. McNeill. “We got truckloads of stuff, including many ship models.”

In 1984, the Hampton Mariner’s Museum officially changed its name to the N.C. Maritime Museum and, more importantly, was designated a subsidiary museum rather than a section of the N.C. Museum of Natural History.

“It became a truly and totally-funded state museum,” said Mr. McNeill. “That was a big step.”

By 1985, yearly attendance far exceeded 150,000 and programs had expanded to include onboard trawling expeditions, fossil digs, celestial navigation lectures, traditional wooden boatbuilding classes,

sailing experiences, Croatan Forest hikes, mushroom walks, island excursions, art exhibitions, teacher workshops, wooden boat regattas, and more. Many of the museum's program leaders continued to be area residents and scientists who believed in the museum's mission. By now, the stellar Traditional Wooden Boat Show, Summer Science School for Children and Strange Seafood Exhibition were permanent fixtures on the museum calendar. The staff had produced and published three books on coastal ecology, which would grow to eight by 1995, and the museum's first boat, the *Essex*, constructed by Geoffrey Scofield, had been completed.

On the heels of the museum's name change came its beautiful new building on Front Street. The style of the 18,000 square-foot structure combined 19th century Beaufort architecture with early designs of U.S. Lifesaving Service buildings. The interior's massive beams and yellow pine woodwork evokes the feeling of being in a large wooden ship.

Spacious, multi-gabled and smelling of fresh wood, the new N.C. Maritime Museum officially opened in Front Street on May 18, 1985. Energized by its new facility, the staff caught its second wind and looked forward to the future with new enthusiasm. Programs began in the temporary watercraft center across the street and the *Silver Chalice*, built to represent a small merchant vessel of the 1580s and to serve on the historic replica *Elizabeth II*, was launched.

With the new museum came six new staff members, one of which was a designer and exhibits section head. With this added position, plus an exhibits support staff, the museum's exhibits and design department took a giant leap forward. Within a few years the exhibit hall featured such comprehensive displays as "Coastal Marine Life," "The Sea Shall Not Have Them," "...all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by..." "...and throw away the oars!," and "The Silver Clipper." The exhibit staff also designed and built the "USS Monitor," a traveling exhibit that received the Southeastern Museums Conference Curator's Committee Exhibition Competition Award for Outstanding Achievement.

One of the museum's most innovative successes is its Cape Lookout Studies Program, begun in the late 1980s and brought to fruition in 1991. Demand for the program has always been high, even without advertising. Part of its attraction is its field station in the old U.S. Coast Guard Station on Cape Lookout National Seashore. Two to three hundred visitors are overnight guests each year, many of whom have made significant contributions to environmental conservation and research. Participants range from public school students to college students to bird watching groups. The program offers workshops and lectures on natural history and the marine environment, combining wilderness experience, community service, relative comfort, and instruction. The field station's early days of generators and no water pressure have been replaced by wind and solar power systems. Volunteers have put in untold hours to maintain the remote outpost, despite harsh summer sun, strong winds, and incessant salt spray.

Almost immediately after moving into its new building on Front Street, the museum laid plans for a permanent boatbuilding and small craft conservation shop. In 1992, the new half-million-dollar Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center opened to the public, a monument to the vision of Mr. McNeill, the success of Mr. Scofield's early boatbuilding programs, and the perseverance of current museum Director Rodney Barfield. Mr. Scofield did not live to see the watercraft center. Tragically, he died of cancer before the building was completed.

With the new watercraft center, the museum's small craft program came of age, providing a permanent facility dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of water transport. Classes instruct "wannabe" boatbuilders in lofting, tool making, oar making, finishing and general boatbuilding carpentry. It is where skillful and loving hands of staff members and volunteers continue to build sleek, clean, master crafted wooden boats, and where model builders construct scale-model vessels in the John S. MacCormack ship model shop, named for Cmdr. John S. MacCormack, one of the museum's most memorable volunteers, ships model builder and scrimshander.

The decade since the museum took residence on Front Street has passed quickly, and, again. Significant changes have taken place. Mr. McNeill retired in 1988 and Rodney Barfield came on board as director; the Harborside facility across from the museum was purchased by the state from the Friends of

the Museum; the popular Cape Lookout Studies Program was initiated; and the Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center opened.

“A lot of things just fell our way, like getting the land to build the museum from the Smith Family,” said Mr. McNeill. “It was such a fun thing, the whole time. I don’t know what the final outcome will be, but I think it will continue to grow and I hope it will continue to highlight the preservation of North Carolina’s maritime heritage, coupled with coastal natural history.”

All this from a “collection” of fishing tackle and fish mounts hoarded away in a small fisheries laboratory in 1904.

So where do we go from here?

Now in its twentieth year, the museum still has visions, ideas and projects to be realized but space has become a major problem.

The collections storage is full and major artifacts can no longer be solicited or accepted. The exhibit hall is brimming over and the library no longer accepts donations. There are twenty-five North Carolina vernacular work boats never seen by the public and, in the height of summer when visitation reaches more than 200,000, the building nearly bursts its seams.

To pursue its visions and ideas, the museum must acquire considerable space. Ten thousand square feet of indoor space and several acres of outdoor space are needed to meet current program and exhibit needs. It’s no surprise, then, that the museum administration is seeking a waterfront building and, perhaps, land away from the downtown area to continue its mission.

To more thoroughly interpret maritime history, the museum would like to demonstrate the old U.S. Lifesaving Service rescue drill, a procedure that uses a Lyle gun and requires a large, empty space; erect a naval stores exhibit, another major part of the area’s maritime experience, to include demonstrations of the extraction of pine rosin, the making of pitch, and the erection of a tar kiln; more effectively administer its Junior Sailing Program, designed for youngsters age 8 to 15 who use prams built in the museum’s watercraft center to learn sailing and safety; develop a “working classroom” on the water, using a 40-foot sharpie work boat the museum would replicate to sail the North Carolina coast and take on students.

To do justice to its maritime history and small craft endeavor, the museum is in dire need of a conservation laboratory. Many artifacts offered are from submerged vessels and are in need of conservation. The museum has no space on which to erect a shop or lab to preserve such materials.

Another museum goal is to make the state’s flora a larger part of programming. Many plants and shrubs have not only contributed to the economic life of the coastal community, but entered the language and lore of its people. The museum would like to add such a dimension with a historic native plants botanical garden of several acres, complete with self-guided nature trails.

The exhibits department has also developed a five-year plan to include the completion of a permanent exhibit already in progress. Titled “North Carolina’s Working Watercraft,” its purpose is to illustrate what makes North Carolina boatbuilding distinct, and how dugouts, particularly split-dugouts, are the basis for boatbuilding construction unique to North Carolina.

Another major exhibit would deal with the state’s declining commercial fisheries and its impact on the African-American communities along the coast.

Waterfowl is another important aspect of coastal natural history, and a permanent exhibit on the Atlantic Flyway would incorporate a portion of a decoy collection and other artifacts, while telling the story of traditional livelihoods along the Outer Banks.

Then there’s the long-range exhibit plan to tackle the issue of the changing face of the state’s coastal towns because of continuing pollution and unchecked development. Other topics in the planning stages include navigation and piloting, the geology of North Carolina, and the first mariners.

So the museum is again at another crucial turning point, one of excitement and potential.

“We conduct some 300 public programs each year, and annual visitation numbers between 220,000 and 230,000,” said Director Rodney Barfield. “Our location is exactly right, the history is here, we have an excellent staff and we have the vision. We just don’t have the physical facilities.”

But with continued support of the community, dependable assistance from the Friends, and a bit of good luck, that, too, will come...again.